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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM KIRF BO VT  
SUBJECT: HOLY SEE VIEWS ON BELARUS

CLASSIFIED BY: Rafael Foley, Acting DCM.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Holy See is cautiously optimistic about the possibilities for opening new spaces for the Catholic Church in Belarus, following the June 18 to 22 visit to the country by Cardinal Bertone, the Holy See's Secretary of State. The Holy See values the recognition of Catholicism in the Religion Law, while acknowledging that it places burdensome requirements on smaller religious denominations. The Holy See's Director for Belarus did not have information about the Cardinal's criticism of sanctions, but promised to relay our views on the issue to his superiors. In addressing both pastoral and diplomatic issues during his visit, Bertone conveyed a message of hope at the expense of calling attention to the regime's restrictions on freedom of religion. A Papal visit to Belarus is unlikely in the near future. End summary.

¶2. (C) Embassy A/DCM met with Monsignor Julio Murat, Holy See Director for Belarus, on June 30. Murat took note of our concerns about the critical comments regarding economic sanctions reportedly made by Cardinal Tarciso Bertone during his visit. While he did not have information about what Bertone had said on the issue, he promised to pass to his superiors our reaffirmation of the legitimacy and appropriateness of the Belneftekhim sanctions.

¶3. (C) Murat stated that the Holy See welcomed the fact that the Government of Belarus, through the 2002 Religion Law, had recognized the Catholic Church as one of the traditional churches in the country. The Religion Law can and should be improved, he said, as it is true that it places burdensome requirements on smaller denominations. There are challenges to religious freedom in many countries in the region, mostly because of authoritarian governments being excessively concerned with monitoring and controlling religious activities, and because of a tendency to identify a particular religion with the national culture or identity. Belarus, he added, was no exception, even if the situation there was better than in Georgia.

¶4. (C) Murat said that the Orthodox Patriarch of Belarus seems to be an open-minded person and that relations between Catholics and Orthodox are good. He confirmed that the Holy See would like to formalize an agreement with the GOB in order to extend rights to the Catholic Church in the fields of education and social services. This would complement the freedom to worship that Catholics already enjoy. The Holy See understands, he added, that "the government of Belarus is what it is", and in this regard he lamented that Belarusians themselves were not more active in demanding more rights. Murat thought that, while it was true that irregularities during the last elections had increased Lukashenka's margin of victory, he would have won without irregularities as well.

¶5. (C) Murat did not rule out a papal visit to Belarus, but noted that the 81 year old pontiff does not travel often and is very selective in accepting the numerous invitations that he receives.

¶6. (C) Comment: Murat did not contest our views on the

appropriateness of the Belneftekhim sanctions and was not aware of the Cardinal's reported comments. His analysis of the situation is influenced by what he sees as the reality of the current state of affairs in Belarus and the idiosyncratic Holy See acceptance of incremental changes over a long period of time.

¶7. (C) Comment continued: Cardinal Bertone's optimism following the visit can be attributed to his decision to take on the role of a visiting pastor during his official trips. In this capacity, the focus is often on the spiritual and material needs of the local parishes, to which he brings a message of hope. This approach, however, undermines the diplomatic role that he could play as the Pope's main political advisor, and diminishes the probability of having him explicitly or implicitly censure governments restricting basic freedoms. End comment.

GLENDON